

BRITAIN'S PHANTOM CATS

Everyone knows black panthers, cheetahs and African lions aren't native to Britain—but why are so many on the prowl?

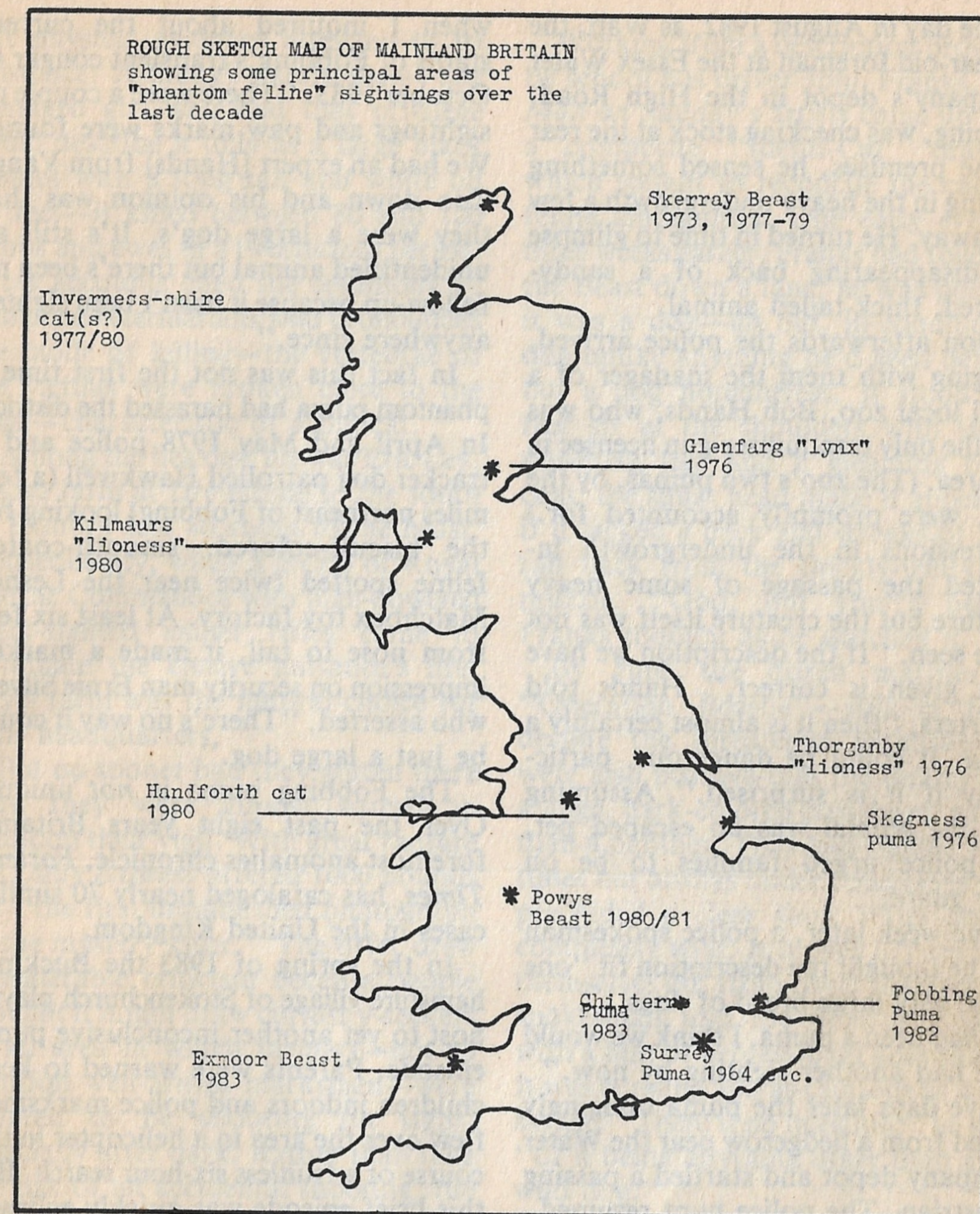
By Michael Goss

THERE WAS A time when a 10-foot-long, thick-coated feline prowled the British Isles from the banks of the Thames as far north as Yorkshire. But that was 10,000 years ago. Today, according to scientists, the only wild cat in Britain is *Felis silvestris*, confined to rural Scotland, and little larger than the ordinary domestic tabby it superficially resembles.

Therefore one wouldn't expect to meet the adaptable but decidedly un-British puma—also known as the cougar or mountain lion—in that small corner of Essex named Fobbing Marshes. Situated about 30 miles east of London and hemmed inside a rough perimeter of major roads, building developments and a railway line, the Marshes are hardly an ideal habitat for



Sightings of strange creatures usually described as large, dark and catlike have been reported in rural settings like this secluded country lane. But many other accounts come from heavily populated urban and suburban areas.



big cats. To the south the sprawling industrial complexes, wharves and refineries of Shell Haven stand between the Marshes and the Thames; running sluggishly to meet the river, on a north-northwest/south-southeast alignment, is Holehaven Creek. The Marshes are bleak and numerous small watercourses

keep the soil permanently moist underfoot. As one local man put it, any puma that lived there would have to be not only desperate for accommodation but web-footed and equipped with inbuilt damp-proofing as well.

But if Bill Watt did not see a puma, what did he see?

One day in August 1982, as Watt, the 58-year-old foreman at the Essex Water Company's depot in the High Road, Fobbing, was checking stock at the rear of the premises, he sensed something moving in the heavy undergrowth a few feet away. He turned in time to glimpse the disappearing back of a sandy-colored, thick-tailed animal.

Soon afterwards the police arrived, bringing with them the manager of a small local zoo, Bob Hands, who was also the only tranquilizer-gun licensee in the area. (The zoo's two pumas, by the way, were promptly accounted for.) Depressions in the undergrowth indicated the passage of some heavy creature but the creature itself was not to be seen. "If the description we have been given is correct," Hands told reporters, "then it is almost certainly a puma. It could be dangerous, particularly if it is surprised." Assuming that the animal was an escaped pet, the police urged families to be on their guard.

One week later, a police spokesman said he thought the description fit "one of the very large breed of dogs If it *had* been a puma, I think we would have had another sighting by now."

Five days later the puma obligingly leaped from a hedgerow near the Water Company depot and startled a passing pedestrian. The police hunt resumed.

The latest account suggested to investigators that the animal was frightened and probably hungry as well. The authorities warned farmers that their flocks might be vulnerable to the marauder. But the puma never bothered the livestock. Instead it vanished.

"It was never confirmed it *was* a puma," Inspector Howell said cautiously

when I inquired about the current status of Fobbing's transient cougar in October 1983. "There were a couple of sightings and paw marks were found. We had an expert [Hands] from Vange Zoo down and his opinion was that they were a large dog's. It's still an unidentified animal but there's been no follow-up because it hasn't been sighted anywhere since."

In fact this was not the first time a phantom puma had harassed the district. In April and May 1978 police and a tracker dog patrolled Hawkwell (a few miles northeast of Fobbing) looking for the biscuit-colored, smooth-coated feline spotted twice near the Lesney Matchbox toy factory. At least six feet from nose to tail, it made a marked impression on security man Ernie Silvers who asserted, "There's no way it could be just a large dog."

The Fobbing puma is *not* unique. Over the past eight years Britain's foremost anomalies chronicle, *Fortean Times*, has cataloged nearly 70 similar cases in the United Kingdom.

In the spring of 1983 the Buckinghamshire village of Stokenchurch played host to yet another inconclusive puma episode. Parents were warned to keep children indoors and police marksmen flew over the area in a helicopter in the course of a fruitless six-hour search. But this brief episode was quickly eclipsed by more bloodcurdling events reported far to the southwest.

"Some say it is a wild cat—a panther or a puma," the *Daily Express* observed on May 9, 1983. "Others claim it is a wild dog. One thing is certain. It is big, black and deadly."

Unlike many other feline intruders the Black Beast of Exmoor, as it was called,

left physical evidence attesting to its existence. Although rarely seen—one teenaged girl who had that privilege could describe it only as a large black animal with a long tail and white on its feet—it killed between 80 and 100 lambs and ewes in a two-month period. Press accounts cited the testimony of unnamed veterinarians who pronounced the mode of killing—the vertebrae of the victims were broken close to the skull—characteristic of a big cat.

Among the heaviest hit was Eric Ley, whose farm at Drewstone to the south of Exmoor lost 40 sheep to the beast. Consequently, when a group of Royal Marine Commandos with high-powered night-sighted sniper rifles came to terminate the elusive nuisance's life, Ley's farm was the natural choice for their headquarters.

But no sooner had they gotten there than they were almost forced to abandon their vigil. With great fanfare the *Daily Express* offered 1000 pounds for "the first unpublished photograph of the mystery killer." The offer drew considerable criticism because people thought it might draw curiosity-seekers to an area in which farmers—not to mention well-armed marksmen—were reputed to be shooting on sight, especially after dark. Rather than take the risk of an accidental shooting, the soldiers indicated they might withdraw.

As it turned out, however, the anticipated sightseer invasion failed to materialize. The reward went unclaimed and needless to say, neither human nor Beast was gunned down. But the sheep-killings continued and before long the supposed big cat was being described as a remarkably unpleasant-looking mongrel *dog*.

Working from a description provided by school bus driver John Franks, *The Mail on Sunday*'s artists came up with a composite "Identi-Cat" drawing which sought to reconcile the canine-feline ambiguities. One early evening three weeks earlier, Franks had followed the Beast down a lane; he was positive it was a dog—an old, ill-conditioned dog unlike anything he'd seen before, but a dog nonetheless. It stood two feet six at the shoulders with short, powerful legs and a gleaming black coat; the squat head made it appear as if it lacked a neck and streaks of gray ran back from the thickly-whiskered muzzle. "God, but you're ugly," Franks thought as he watched it.

By June the dozen marines of "Operation Beastie"—still in force despite the threatened withdrawal—were also positive that the quarry was a huge, dark-colored crossbreed rather than a panther. They had sighted it six times but always under conditions that precluded a clear shot. "The dog is completely wild. It moves like soldiers themselves do, from cover to cover," a spokesman told the *Sunday Express* with a hint of professional admiration. It was cunning and as cautious as it was savage. "There is no question," he said, "of it being anything other than a big wild dog."

But was it? A month before, a prominent area farmer named Denys Smaldron had said of the Beast, "It kills and eats lambs like no dog or fox ever did. It leaves the bone structure of the neck like you would leave a fishbone in a restaurant." Such fastidiousness—not normally associated with renegade sheep-killing canids—persuaded him that the culprit was some sort of large cat.

With trained marksmen and a horde of amateur sharpshooters on the Beast's trail, the controversy seemed destined to be resolved quickly. But then the Black Beast of Exmoor dropped out of sight—or, more correctly, out of the newspapers. In October 1983, led to believe, by casual remarks of acquaintances, the mystery animal's death had been announced, I phoned the *Exeter Express & Echo* and also the police at South Molton (near Drewstone) for details. None were forthcoming. "We've only heard a rumor that someone shot it," a policeman said. "We have had no conclusive proof that it happened. The chap won't come forward, so it's only a rumor."

* * *

VIEWED IN isolation, the Fobbing puma and the Exmoor Beast can be written off as exercises in popular credulity, aided and abetted by sensation-hungry media. Conversely, seen in true perspective—against, for instance, the backdrop of those other cases recounted in *Fortean Times*—they no longer seem so irrelevant. Throughout the British Isles people think they are seeing large, potentially dangerous and undeniably alien cats: pumas, panthers, lions, cheetahs, lynxes. If this is a new folklore, we ought to know it; if it is a zoological or paranormal fact, it is even more essential that we learn what we can about it.

From the folklorist's perspective, the recent spate of cat stories might be regarded as a variety of "urban legend": an allegedly true tale founded upon strictly apocryphal evidence ("friend-of-a-friend" testimony) and passed as credible fact from one locality to the next. Although rural in setting and

perhaps tradition—the cat stories are perhaps analogous to the "Black Dog" folklore that permeates practically the entire British Isles—in our modern age of electronic communication they have become the common property of town and country dweller alike. In some respects they are akin to other fabricated wild-animals-in-unlikely-places stories: mice in Coke bottles, for example, or alligators in New York City sewers.

But the urban-legend approach collapses under close scrutiny. For one thing, witnesses whose names we know are claiming firsthand sightings; in urban legends the alleged witnesses are anonymous and unreachable. Could it be, however, that conscious or unconscious recollection of phantom-feline tales has tricked witnesses into feats of misinterpretation concerning large animals seen suddenly and under poor viewing conditions?

The misidentification idea has much to recommend it. Eyewitnesses naturally tend to estimate the size of mystery animals comparatively, usually relating it to the well-known breeds of domestic dogs; Labradors, Great Danes and Alsations are frequently mentioned in the accounts. Common sense might dictate that the dog comparison is more than a little apt; perhaps the "large cats" were quite literally big dogs, transmuted by the witnesses' shock, nocturnal conditions and other confusing factors into something less familiar. And when the witness stubbornly insists he saw a feline, it's always possible to counter that the average person doesn't know much about animals in the wild.

Despite all those wildlife documentaries on television, how many people would recognize a puma if they *did*

happen to see one outside a zoo? The respect afforded expert opinion frequently works against a witness' rendering a report which appears to fly in the face of such authority. "I thought it was an American cougar or mountain lion," a lorry driver said of a long-tailed animal he saw under good visibility one Saturday morning in 1979 on the outskirts of Glasgow, Scotland. Then, with becoming British modesty, he added, "but I'm no expert."

The misidentified dog automatically is trotted out to explain any new phantom feline that pads its way into the newspapers. We already have seen it employed in the cases of the Fobbing puma and the Beast of Exmoor; it was resorted to in September 1980 when a cyclist at Bramley, Surrey, passed within feet of the usual light-colored, pumalike animal only to have a correspondent tell the local press that it was nothing more than "a very large lurcher dog, part Irish wolfhound." The witness himself confessed to having originally mistaken it for a deer—which in many parts of Britain provides another very probable source of error.

Large dogs may be mistaken for big cats rather more often than we think. At the same time more unusual cross-breeds may go wandering abroad at night than we might deem possible. Doubtless many of the pumas and panthers *were* dogs—but where is the irrefutable proof that *each* case on record is susceptible to that explanation? For example, can the black pantherlike animal seen to lope across the road at Telegraph Hill near Exeter on August 13, 1970, truly be reconciled with the docile, overweight and *blind* Labrador caught by a garage owner the

following month? "Fat Black Dog Explodes the Panther Myth," ran one newspaper headline. But perhaps not to everyone's satisfaction

The "wildlife ignorance" attributed to witnesses who continue to insist they saw a big cat occasionally receives a drastic rebuff. There is, for example, the case of a Scottish witness, a former resident of Central Africa, who said she had seen enough large cats to know them when she saw them, and she had seen a dark-tan puma or lioness 100 yards away. To that, of course, the skeptic will retort that living in Africa doesn't make you an animal expert. Yet when an undisputed expert happens on the scene, the phenomenon becomes no more credible. A superintendent and Senior Cat Keeper from Dudley Zoo followed up reports of a "cheetah" seen by a schoolteacher in the English Midlands in late July 1980 and got within 300 yards of what may well have been the same animal; one of them pursued it for 15 minutes. Their verdict: definitely not a fox, apparently catlike—but they were just too far out of range to be able to confirm exactly what it was. So they reserved judgment—without, however, claiming it was a Labrador dog.

If there had been reports of a puma missing from a local wildlife park, chances are the zoo men would have declared the animal a puma. Most zoologists admit it is theoretically possible for a cat of that size and behavior to survive in Britain, at least for a while. So some speculate that the cats witnesses encounter are genuine felines which have escaped from small or private collections—or else (shades of New York's subterranean alligator

plague!) suddenly-unwanted pets clandestinely set at liberty by irresponsible owners—a trend hypothetically caused by the passing of the 1976 Dangerous Wild Animal Act.*

In October 1980 the escapee theory received a measure of renewed credibility thanks to an Inverness-shire, Scotland, farmer named Ted Noble. On the 29th of that month an adult puma was taken alive in the baited trap Noble had built for it on his Cannich farm, thus refuting all the unkind aspersions cast against his sanity when he insisted that such an animal had been preying on his sheep.

The capture excited national media coverage—and controversy. Noble's puma proved to be elderly, rheumatoid (or otherwise lame) in one leg, well-groomed and very tame. "Felicity's" droppings revealed she had been supplementing her mutton diet with rabbit and deer but the authorities could not believe she had been out of captivity for long. Eddie Orbell, director of the Highland Wildlife Park at Aviemore, refused to believe this was the puma said to have terrorized a wide expanse of Scotland for the last seven years; the idea, he said, was "just ridiculous." And what of the allegation that there had originally been *two* released pumas? If true, it would mean that besides Felicity another was still at large.

To accept the idea that all the British big-cat reports are caused by escaped animals, we have to presuppose not only a wonderfully high number of privately-owned exotic pets but an alarming number of escapees—not to mention an equally pronounced tendency for inconsiderate owners to secretly release

the animals into the wild.

In reality, however, investigation invariably fails to uncover the numbers of animals absent without leave from local zoos, parks or private holdings necessary to account for the myriad reports. Nor do known records of escaped felines inspire much confidence in this interpretation; without exception all known examples are shot or recaptured within a matter of days, but more often hours. The clouded leopard that fled Howletts Zoo, Canterbury, Kent, in 1975 did amazingly well to last nine months before a farmer killed it. Most escaped animals seemed glad to return to custody; a few, like the puma that meandered into a Manchester house and allowed itself to be taken off to the police station at the end of a dog leash, appear to have given themselves up.

* * *

WHILE admitting that a certain number of escaped or released felines may be at large in parts of Britain, zoologists don't believe these cats are "hideaways": relic populations descended from prehistoric times and miraculously missed by natural historians.

One who seeks to explain the reports in precisely those terms is Di Francis. In her *Cat Country* (1983) she argues that a low-slung, leopard-sized feline has been with us since the Ice Age—a reclusive animal, rarely seen. We know it exists only because of the occasional modern sightings and because of garbled references to it in folklore; the legendary Black Dog, she claims, could conceivably have been a Black Cat. The book features some intriguing photographs—which scoffers have dismissed as depicting nothing

more than overgrown but otherwise ordinary felines.

For the "native hideaway" interpretation there must be substantial tracts of undisturbed land and a viable food supply. Even in crowded Britain such virgin, sparsely-populated territory does exist, principally in northern Scotland, parts of Wales and the rural southwest of England. Living on sheep, deer, rabbits and smaller game, a large predator could survive in these areas without attracting too much attention. Sure enough, reports of big cats—some of them very impressive—come from these areas. But others come from heavily-populated zones where food and freedom from human scrutiny are all but impossible.

It may seem strange that the British Isles has no large predator, feline or canine. After the cave lion and wolf became extinct, these roles passed down to the wild cat and fox; even the lynx—one of the few felines truly suited to the demands of the northern winter—is missing except in a scattering of anomalous accounts.* None of these animals matches the long-tailed, good-sized cats witnesses describe.

One reviewer called *Cat Country* "a contender for the most implausible book of the year . . . or an elaborate hoax." That may be overstating the matter but it is true that Francis' claims are mostly unconvincing. I don't quarrel with her reliance on eyewitness testimony. Any researcher who deals with

*Charles Fort mentions cases of "stray" lynxes found in Britain but the animal cannot be considered indigenous. Large cats' aversion to climates both damp and cold argues against the existence of British hideaways. The Siberian tiger, of course, can tolerate extremely low temperatures but its habitat is on the average drier than Scotland's; the snow leopard is believed to migrate to warmer lowland valleys during severe weather. Neither animal is well-suited to life in the Scottish hills and is not found there.

anomalies must do the same; after all, if you can't take the unsupported word of the people involved, what else is there? But on a more technical level she makes the British cat sound like a most unlikely beast.

By all accounts it has unretractable claws. This notably canine characteristic is found in only one large cat—the cheetah—where it helps the animal move rapidly across the open plains in pursuit of prey. Claws would serve no purpose in the British cat, which would be hunting in territory utterly unlike the open plains the cheetah prefers.

If zoologists have problems with a cat with unretractable claws, they are doubly at a loss to find a feline analogy for the dazzling color variations Francis claims for her species: "ginger or fawn through all shades of brown to chocolate, jet black, silver and charcoal gray" or striped (black on silver gray, fawn with brown, gold and gray). Because Britain is relatively small, a large cat would have found itself in early and intense competition with the wolf, which managed to postpone its extinction until the 18th Century. The basic natural rule says that two large predators cannot coexist in so limited a territory.

Could a large cat really have survived for thousands of years in an increasingly-industrialized Britain without ever being caught or even seen? Francis managed to find a couple of men who claim to have shot a Labrador-sized animal with long tufted ears in Devon some 20 years ago; the body, she believes, would by now have decomposed in the acidic soil. Foxes, wild cats and just about every other form of wildlife in the United Kingdom

*The act requires adequate licenses for the keeping of certain wild animals on private premises.

fall victim to traffic; this animal allows itself to be seen from cars yet adroitly avoids being flattened by them.

It is puzzling, too, that the British cat reports are mostly recent. Although Mrs. Francis could be correct in assuming *some* of folklore's celebrated Black Dogs were actually cats, the hypothesis has several weaknesses. A number of the accounts she quoted make it plain that the narrator was describing a "supernatural" *hound*. No amount of allowance for exaggeration can change these creatures into felines, nor does it serve much purpose to speculate that the animal's baying was in reality a large cat's roar.

Moreover, in view of the cat's association with witchcraft in British folklore, it would have been more dramatic to describe the mystery beast as a satanic feline than as a dog—what else could you expect with cats being so close to the devil's heart?—*if* that was what the witness claimed to have seen. But the terrible beast is always a dog!

The Black Dog tales are too explicit about the canine nature of the creatures to allow us to turn them into native British cats. If the Beast of Exmoor was (or is) the aberrant mongrel many now believe, it has exacted an ironic vengeance on the assertion that its folkloric predecessors were felines. The Black Dog has been claimed by Mrs. Francis as a large cat; here the Black Cat will have proved to be a dark-colored dog.

Francis treats her hideaway cats as animals unique to Britain. American readers aware of comparable reports in their own country will know this is less than accurate. Furthermore, similar beasts have been reported as far away

as Australia. Not even the widely-distributed leopard managed to get that far—or if it did, it didn't last long enough to leave any record of its existence. Another problem is that the hideaway theory fails to take into account one major characteristic of these encounter-incidents: despite coordinated, often intensive searches, the ostensibly solid animals have a bizarre habit of vanishing, ghostlike, from under our noses.

The physical evidence they leave behind is ambiguous. There are prints said by one expert to be "very typical of a puma" but rejected by another as having been made by a dog; livestock is killed cat-fashion and then laid at the door of other predators; photographs are just imperfectly scaled enough for critics to say they show ordinary domestic cats. And so on

Those Fortean who suspect that the "animals"—in common with other bizarre creatures reported all over the world—are apparitional, not zoological, nod knowingly; they would have anticipated nothing else. For her part Mrs. Francis has embarked on a project whose aim is to capture one of the "hideaways" alive and forever end the confusion and the controversy.

Only 15 months after the Fobbing puma scare, Thurrock, Essex, newspapers were carrying reports of yet another mystery feline—a black panther this time—seen by three witnesses at Horndon, little over a mile away from the locality haunted by the alleged cougar. Two of the witnesses observed the cat simultaneously on the same afternoon across a distance of 100 yards; both are positive it was a panther, not a large dog. Anne Cheale watched

the beast through field glasses; since she owns a couple of Dobermans, one likely candidate for misidentification seems to be eliminated. As I write these words (on November 21, 1983, some 16 days after the sightings and fruitless police

search), there have been no further reports of the Horndon panther. Believing it to be an escaped pet, Mrs. Cheale told me, "I'd like to put it out of my mind. I don't like to think of an animal like that out there."



TRAGEDY FORETOLD BUT UNAVOIDABLE

IN THE *Chicago Sun-Times* for September 21, 1983, Adrienne Drell reported on a nightmare story that's stranger than fiction:

"With stops in London, Paris and Monte Carlo, it was to have been a long-remembered honeymoon trip to Europe. But at the last minute—after the bride's younger sister dreamed the newlyweds were killed in a plane crash—Kathleen and Richard Carsten of Lombard [Ill.] altered their plans.

"The change proved futile.

"What was planned as a lazy two weeks along Cape Cod resulted in the nightmare coming true. The Carstens and the sister, Therese Newman, apparently died in a plane crash at sea.

"The small Bellanca aircraft piloted by Carsten was believed on its way back to Boston on September 11 after the three spent a day in Provincetown, Mass. The bodies of the victims are thought to be trapped in the airplane 100 feet under water.

"For their family and friends in the Chicago area, the horror has not quite sunk in.

"'Kathleen was happy-go-lucky and quite adventurous,' said her older brother Dennis Newman. 'But when Terry said, "Don't go," Kathleen changed their honeymoon plans.'

"Kathleen, 34, a registered nurse, and Richard, 41, a luxury car wholesaler, were married September 4 in a lavish ceremony Therese Newman, 28, a college instructor in Boston, was her sister's maid of honor.

"Several days later, the Carstens flew off to Boston in his green and white plane. Then, on the fateful Sunday, they persuaded Therese Newman to join them for the day in Provincetown.

"Provincetown airport records show the plane arrived at 1:00 P.M. and a car was rented shortly afterward. But the car keys were never returned and the plane wasn't logged out by the time the tiny airport closed at 9:15 P.M.

"Back in Chicago, Dennis, the eldest of the four Newman children, and the rest of the family were unaware at the time of the Provincetown excursion.

"But the family became concerned when they didn't hear from the honeymooners They phoned the Federal Aviation Administration, the Coast Guard and the Massachusetts police, who wanted a description of the aircraft.

"'You probably wondered why we asked, but I have a green wooden wing in my possession,' one official told Newman. The man explained that the part had washed ashore but no search had been launched because an airplane had not been reported missing"

